

Adapted from Bill Cooney's History of the Community Church; Cora Tarbox's History of Westport Island, Maine; Katherine Chase Owen's Early Edgecomb, Maine; WCA materials; and Ruth Nelson's History of the Westport Community Association.

Westport Community Church



The Westport Community Church is a striking, small Greek Revival structure adjacent to Westport Island's Town Hall. Thought to have been originally built in the 1830s on the property of James McCarty, and used there for a time as a Music Hall, the building was moved to its present site about 1864, where it was placed on its current stone foundation. James McCarty deeded the building and lot to the Methodist Episcopal Conference to be the new home of Westport's Methodist congregation after they had decided to abandon the use of the larger Union Meeting House, which later became the Town Hall.

Brief History of the Original Westport Denominations

Early Baptists

Free Will Baptists and Methodists were the two denominations that were most active in Westport's early years. The doctrines of the two denominations were similar, as well as the educational backgrounds of their preachers. Most did not have the formal education of Congregational ministers but were tradespeople or farmers and studied the Bible on their own.



Benjⁿ Randall

In the 1780s Benjamin Randall, an evangelist identified with the Baptists, based in New Durham, New Hampshire, visited the area and appointed several Elders for the groups of followers he inspired, including Daniel Hibbard. The Free Will Baptists appointed Elders, who could attend conferences where discussions could set the church position concerning such practices as the method of baptism – submersion or sprinkling. All Elders appeared to be equal, though some took more responsibility and leadership at the quarterly conferences, and Elder Daniel Hibbard appears to be the leader of the quarterly meeting that included congregations covering Woolwich, Georgetown, and Edgecomb, including Squam Island, as Westport was then called.

By law in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts families were taxed to support a minister hired by the town. One of Hibbard's first actions in 1781 was to apply to the General Court to have the Baptist families' portion of the tax in Woolwich "set aside", rather than going to support the town's appointed minister. In 1798 Massachusetts adopted a new constitution which allowed Baptists to incorporate formally, and with this change, after 20 years of petitioning, Hibbard was successful in 1801 and town funds were made available to support him. In 1804 Edgecomb voted to accept him as a Minister for the Town. A house was built for his use at the

eastern side of what is now the junction of the West Shore Road and Main Road, and Hibbard lived there until his death in 1823. It shows as parcel 36 in the 1815 map produced by Stephen Parsons for the town of Edgecomb.

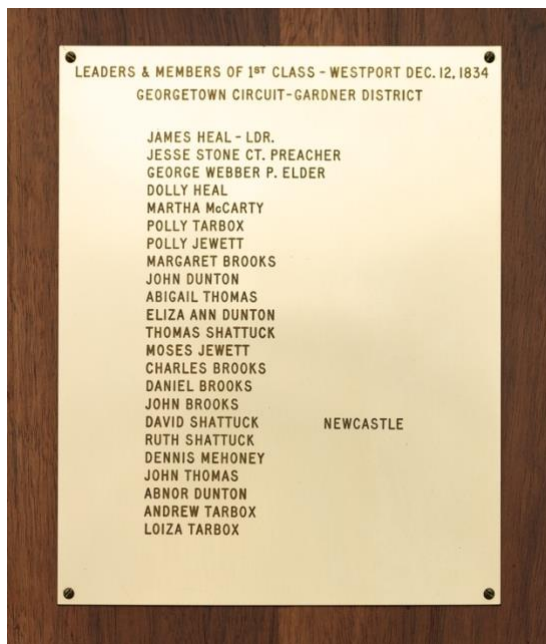
Among strong Westport supporters of Randall was Josiah Parsons, a prominent citizen. He purchased land in 1785 that might have been intended for a minister's residence. A house was listed on the property when the western half was sold to Samuel Tarbox in 1806 by Stephen Parsons, Josiah's son, and Hibbard may have lived there prior to the new house built for him after 1804. Stephen had married Margaretta F. Randall, and his sister, Sarah, married Wilson Randall, a son of Benjamin, an indication of how close the family was to the Baptist cause.

The Baptist Society started to decline in membership after the 1820s. Elder Hibbard died July 23, 1823. David Webber became the new Elder but moved to Georgetown in 1832 to establish a new congregation there. Others moved to Boothbay where another congregation had been established. And a new religious group was now meeting on Westport.

Methodist Episcopal Church

Methodism, as organized by John Wesley, held to a structure similar to the Church of England. Bishops and selected Elders were the only ones allowed to give the Sacraments. This limitation created dissension within the American church and in 1784 a conference in Baltimore Maryland created the Methodist Episcopal church. Membership in the church was "obtained by baptism" and access to the sacraments was less restricted.

Jesse Lee, a traveling preacher for the newly formed Methodist Episcopal Church, came to Bath in 1793. By 1797 he had established six circuits up the Kennebec River and eastward to the Penobscot River. However, the spread of Methodism to Westport came slowly. According to the Reverend G.B. Chadwick, Arrowsic and Georgetown were not added to the Methodist circuit until 1800. Caleb Hogg was the first traveling preacher to venture down the Sasanoa River, followed by others. Henry Martin in 1808 was going to expand the circuit to include the region from the Kennebec to Boothbay, but within days of his arrival in Georgetown he died.



The first known Methodist class was finally formed in 1817 under the direction of preacher Jerri Marsh, with 16 people in attendance. It was probably held in the home of William Heal where preachers to the area often stayed. A Reverend Parker came to Westport in 1820-1825. But Methodism remained weak along the Sasanoa River despite revivals that were held from time to time. Preachers only served for one or two years, and this did not foster any continuity or establish a firm relationship with the people.

Continuity came in 1834. From plaque in the Church we know that a class was formed December 12, 1834 and probably met at the home of James Heal. James Heal was the Leader, with Jesse Stone as Preacher and George Webber as Presiding Elder. The Preacher alternated between Westport and Woolwich, where a

church had been established. A bible study class was conducted by the Preacher until the Leader of the class became proficient.

The first Eastern Maine Conference was held in Bangor, Maine, August 2, 1848. All Maine Methodist Episcopal Churches east of the Kennebec River were under this conference. Heretofore, Preachers had not been required to have additional education to be admitted to the conference. In order to ensure that Preachers had attained a certain level of religious and doctrinal knowledge, the requirement for a license was introduced. Another improvement was placing the churches under new District Supervisors or Presiding Elders. The quarterly reports from each church in Georgetown, Woolwich and Westport improved. And the membership at Woolwich and Westport increased to 136 by 1852.

However, after 1852 membership declined for both Baptists and Methodists. The Methodist Episcopal Congregation joined the Free Will Baptists in the use of the Meeting House in 1856, now called the Union Meeting House, but there continued to be separate services for each denomination, one on Sunday morning and the other in the afternoon. Many members attended both services depending on the preacher. However, the decline in membership continued and by 1863 Westport's Methodist congregation was down to 24 members and they decided to abandon the use of the Union Meeting House and obtained the use of a smaller building and moved it to the current site. The larger building was abandoned.



The new, smaller building was previously a "Music Hall" owned by James McCarty. By 1864 it was moved from further north on the island to a small lot, 1/8th of an acre, on the north side of the Meeting House lot. On March 28, 1864 James McCarty deeded the property to Moses Jewett, John Brooks, Manson C. Dunton, Austin Colby and Andrew Tarbox of Woolwich, as trustees for the church under the Eastern Maine Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. The deed stated that the trustees shall "change and convert or cause to be changed and converted the Hall now standing on the said lot into a neat, convenient and comfortable house or place of worship for the use of the members of the Methodist Episcopal

Church in the United States of America...". Renovation to the building involved the installation of pews and a raised pulpit. A recent examination of the building by a preservationist from the Maine State Preservation Commission reported that the building was changed from its original structure. Money for reconstruction was raised by selling pews.



At about the same time the new church building was established in the center of the island a chapel was built on the north end, the current North End Church, which is now the home of an active Baptist congregation. In an Oct 7 1865 report to the Methodist Episcopal Quarterly Conference the Reverent D.M. True, preacher for Arrowsic as well as Westport, reported that there were "two Sunday schools at Arrowsic, one Sunday and a Bible class at the North Westport Chapel." The chapel was dedicated in 1874, and the title deeded to the Methodist Episcopal Conference in 1910.

The Center Church continued to be served by a preacher residing in Arrowsic. Vinal E. Hills was the first resident preacher in 1887, but his tour was short. Carl N. Garland came to Westport as a teacher in 1896 and also served the church. Membership rose and fell over the years, but a steady decline started when there was no longer a preacher. In 1915 the size of the interior of the Center Church was reduced by removing pews and installing a vestry. Wiscasset provided a preacher periodically and C. R. Duncan served both the church and the Chapel from 1923-1931. He was provided a parsonage. But church records indicate there were twenty-two members in 1952, and no preacher had been provided for many years.

The Westport Community Association



In the early 1950s some of the older residents of Westport were concerned about the deteriorating condition of the Center Church. In 1955 Eleanor H. Smith, who owned the neighboring house which became the Squire Tarbox Inn, made a proposal to organize a group to take responsibility for the restoration of the Church. Quoting from the Association's first report of activities, August 12, 1957:

"Activities began with a silver tea held September 1955. Tea and cake were served under the oaks beside the church, and the response to the ideal of restoring the old church was overwhelming. In



one afternoon the sum of \$500 was raised. Shingles were purchased and the men of the town graciously donated their time to put them on. Paint was also donated and again the men turned to and in one day the church had a new coat of paint. The ladies also have been busy inside, dusting and cleaning to make it suitable for use.

In order to obtain the church from the Methodist Conference, it was necessary to have a formal organization and in October 1955 the Westport Community Association was formed. After considerable negotiation, title to the church property was received."

The Center Church became the property of the Westport Community Association by deed dated October 8, 1956. Even before title had transferred, the Westport Community Association, or WCA as it is usually referred to,

held several religious services, drawing from clergy around the area. The Methodist Conference included wording in the deed requiring the building to be used for some form of church service for at least 10 years, or the building would revert to the conference.

The Founding Members of the WCA were:

Eleanor Siebert Smith, President
Herbert B. Cromwell, Vice President
Teresa S. Richardson
Dr. Ernest G. Graumann, Treasurer
Hazel S. Knight
Paul L. Hodgdon, Secretary
Frank T. Greenleaf

J. Louis Doyle and Dorothy Tarbox were also included as original members of the Board of Trustees.

In addition to the preservation of the Church, the WCA took responsibility for organizing social events for the town and making improvements to the Town Hall next door to the Church.

Again, quoting from the first report:

“Several hot suppers and a cookout were held in this first summer [1956] as money-making ventures. These netted more than \$200. In conjunction with the Westport Volunteer Fire Department, the Association sponsored the weekly Saturday night dances and earned about \$115.”



“A committee was appointed to plan improvements in the kitchen facilities of the Town Hall and put in running water if possible. This would cost between \$300 and \$400. The report of the committee was accepted and tabled for 1956. However, this year [1957] with some of the money raised in 1956 a start has been made in remodeling these kitchen facilities.”

By 1959 the WCA had outfitted the Town Hall kitchen with a sink, running water, an electric range, and an inventory of silverware, plates, bowls, serving dishes and the like for the suppers and community

events now held in the Hall.

The WCA continued to organize church services for year-round and summer residents for many summers, but in recent years attendance was so low that the Association discontinued them. The Church continues to be used for weddings, memorial services, and other special events, and the WCA currently holds a Fall concert and Christmas program each year.

Christmas 1992

Timeline:

1771

John, Ruth, Joshua, Molly and Samuel Whitten joined the Presbyterian congregation led by the Reverend John Murry, based in Boothbay

1780

Benjamin Randall preached in Woolwich where about 300 people had gathered, and a small group of 20 met on Squam island Oct 9, 1781, to become the first on the island

1784

Conference in Baltimore, MD establishes the Methodist Episcopal church, splitting off from the original Methodism of John Wesley to be less hierarchical

1793

Jesse Lee, a traveling preacher for the newly formed Methodist Episcopal church, visits Bath, and introduces the denomination to the area

1800

A circuit of visitation and preaching for Methodism was established that included Arrowsic and Georgetown, and by extension, Westport

1817

First Methodist Episcopal class on Westport formed, with 16 people in attendance, probably at the home of William Heal

1830's

The Methodist Episcopal Church takes off on Westport in this decade. In 1834 a "class" is meeting at the home of James Heal. Preachers were shared with Woolwich, with alternating Sabbath services. The Methodists would use Westport's meetinghouse in the morning, the Baptists in the afternoon.

1852-1856

In 1852 Methodist Episcopal membership had grown 136 for the Woolwich and Westport congregation. But soon declining memberships led to the Baptists and Methodists to form a "Union Church" in 1856.

1864

The Methodists decide to move to a smaller building and on March 28, 1864, James McCarty sells the lot and building which becomes the Westport Community Church to the trustees of the Methodist Episcopal church. The building is renovated to serve as a house of worship, with pews sold to fund the expense.

1887

Vinal E. Hills was the first resident preacher

1915

Alterations were made to the Church to make it smaller inside, taking out part of the pews and adding a vestry.

1923-31

C.R. Duncan served both the Center Church and the North End Chapel and was provided a parsonage.

1955

The Westport Community Association is formed, with the preservation of the Center Church a core purpose.

1956

The Methodist Conference deeds the Center Church to the Westport Community Association, with the proviso that there continue to be religious services held for at least the next ten years.

2002

The Westport Community Church is entered in the National Register of Historic Places

Description, from the National Register of Historic Places application:

The Westport Community Church is a small, Greek Revival building located on the Main Road in Westport, Maine. The east facing building is located on a small, flat lot adjacent to the (former) Union Meeting House; scattered eighteenth- and nineteenth-century farms stretched along the rural road to the north and south. The wooden frame building, built in the 1830s, is clad in clapboards and sits on a low granite foundation.

The narrow front facade is three bays wide. The full cornice return divides the facade into two segments. Within the pedimented form created by the overhanging roof and the cornice return, a single six-over-six window is set under the peak of the roof. Directly above the window is a triangular, louvered attic vent. The striking pediment is further emphasized by moderately wide frieze and architrave boards and crown molding. This treatment is continued directly under the cornice return, where it continues around the building, just under the eaves. Narrow corner boards are located on the corners, framing the lower segment of the facade. Two entry doors are located in the south and north bays of the facade, and are surmounted by four-light transoms with cylinder glass. A large six-over-six window with narrow muntins and 9 14" x 15" panes, is centered between the two doors. Each of the doors and windows are surrounded with flat trim and crowned with a narrow lintel, and the windows are flanked by wooden shutters.

Both the south and north elevations contain four, evenly spaced large six-over-six windows with shutters. There is no fenestration on the west side of the structure.

The interior is composed of two entry halls, one behind each door, an ante room, and the large meeting room. The southern entry contains a door on its north wall into the anteroom. The large front window in this room features grain painting, and crown molding on its lintel. In the northern entry, a grained, cupboard is built against the north wall. A matching cupboard is located in the main meeting room, on the eastern wall in the southeast corner.

The main room consists of three rows of bench pews set along two aisles. The walls are plaster over lath, set above grained wainscot. Every pew is entirely grain painted. The floors are of wide pine and the ceiling is tin, in a geometric pattern. The interior trim on the windows in this room is much less elaborate than that of the ante-room, and the woodwork has been painted, possibly covering additional

graining. A single chandelier, and several wall sconces, all fueled by oil, provide lighting for the room. A small platform at the western end of the room contains a lectern and two candelabra.

There is some indication that the entryway has been remodeled. The Victorian four-panel door leading into the ante room does not match those that lead into the meeting room. The northern wall of the ante room is currently composed of plaster board, however, examination above the dropped tin ceiling reveals that an earlier wall, made of plaster over accordion lath, was located in the same location when the structure was built. It is possible that the ante room either served as a cloak room or study, or was accessible from both entry halls. Fortunately, when a redecorating fervor took over in the main room, the inside of the facade window was left unmolested, and thus maintained its wood grain painting and elaborate crown molding.